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TRACTOR BRINGS TREND TOWARD FEWER AND LARGER FARMS IN IOWA

Two or Three Farms Per Township Swallowed Yearly
in Some Sections; Toward New "Family Size," or
Grapes of Wrath?

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(By the Register's Editorial Research Bureau)

One of the trends in Iowa agriculture at the present time is toward multiple farm operation. Farmer Corntassel gets some more land near his farm and farms both as a single unit by means of his powerful swift new tractor with rubber tires, his purring combine, his red and green four-row cultivator, his shiny disks and other pieces of power machinery.

Corntassel might own his original farm, either completely or in part, or he might be a tenant. He might buy the new acres or rent them under cash or share-crop tenancy. No matter: where before there were two, three, four or so farms, now there is one; where before there were two or more farmers with their families, now there is one, who may or may not have a hired hand part or all of the year.

Statewide, But Variable

In few of Iowa's counties is the tendency not apparent. In about one-third it is slight. In about one-half it is "considerable." In Jefferson County one of the latter, "on an average perhaps two or three farms per township are going into multiple farm operation each year."

The trend does not restrict itself to any one region of the state. In each of the five general regions (defined according to principal source of income), are counties in which the movement is slight and counties in which it is considerable.

A few examples: in the western meat production area, Audubon County reports it slight, and Pottawattamie reports it considerable; in the southern pasture area, Union County considerable, Ringgold County slight; in the cash grain area, Clay County considerable, Kossuth County slight; in the northeastern dairy area, Delaware County slight, Clayton County considerable; and in the eastern meat production area, Linn County considerable, Cedar County slight.

THE CHIEF REQUIREMENT SEEMS TO BE ADAPTABILITY TO POWER MACHINERY. Most of Iowa lends itself to this, but there are limits; a good deal is too hilly or is not of the proper soil types. But long before this limit

was reached, farming as a business and as a way of life could be radically altered for good or ill.

People are very touchy about the matter, even in counties where the changes are not apparent. Take Winnebago. The county agent writes, "The general impression is chiefly a cry of 'Wolf! Wolf!' and is not supported by facts in this county."

Mules Gone, Parity Gone

Why this change which men feel so deeply about and which could be so important to our state?

The fundamental factors are two. First, power machinery makes it possible and cheaper to farm as a single unit an area larger than the "family-sized" farm defined in the days when the horse was the motive power of farm equipment.

Let's illustrate. The efficiency of Farmer Corntassel's machinery and tractor depends upon the hours of use he gets out of them each day, because they represent a larger investment than his old layout, and, unlike horses and mules they do not need to rest and sleep. His son, Elmer, 14; his daughter, Jerry, 17, and his hired hand, Cal, can run the tractor and plows as well as the old man. So, what more natural than to get more land, change off for meals, choring and sleeping, and plow every hour possible, in dry weather even going all night?

The other factor is our old, familiar enemy, the disparity between the prices the farmer gets for what he sells and the prices he pays for what he buys.

This cannot be illustrated simply. It must be told in deflated land values, mortgages on farms, run-down buildings, foreclosures, increase in tenancy, higher taxes, delinquent taxes, mined soils and all the other too, too solid symptoms of a sick agriculture. With the need and ability to farm more efficiently by using power machinery and taking on new land, and with new land to be had through buying or renting land lost by others, the trend is on.

Since Early 'Twenties

This would imply that multiple-farm operation is not a new thing. And it is not. Most persons reporting wide-spread consolidation of farms in their counties assign its beginning to the early 'twenties. But all persons reporting any degree of it in their counties describe AN INCREASE IN THE RATE OF CHANGE SINCE 1929. This corresponds with an intensified farm depression and with a new era of mechanization. But other factors are at work, too.

These other factors must be seen against the backdrop of the other two--mechanization of agriculture and depression. But they flow from and

run into every major problem in our national economy. Some of the most vital relationships can be traced.

From AAA to ZZZ

Unemployment in the cities means sons and daughters coming back to or staying on the farms, children who would otherwise have migrated. Thus, fathers and sons buy or rent adjacent land and operate the whole in partnership. Unemployed capital is looking for work, too, and land values are low. Men and institutions buy good land and have large areas or many units farmed by tenants perhaps under a manager.

High cost of building and heavy taxes discourage owners from rebuilding ramshackle houses, barns, and sheds. So they wreck them and rent or sell the land. The AAA takes land out of grains; Farmer Corntassel and Elmer have more time but the same amount of machinery, so they get more land. Installment buying and financing makes purchase of machinery easier and the incentive for capital returns more keen. A man who is a poor tenant and an undesirable neighbor influences the landlord to rent to a nearby owner at a lower but more certain rent. Insurance companies and banks, trying to unload vast acres acquired through foreclosures, sell, naturally, to the expanding commercial and mechanized farmer. He is likely to be a good buyer.

Some of these factors are powerful in one county; others in another; and in every county there are factors more individual to the region and the farm.

Death and Mortgages

An attempt to relate the extent of the trend to the average sized farm, the average value of the land, the percentage operated by tenants, and the average indebtedness per county and per region yields no fruit, though if enough of the farms absorbed were studied in the light of these factors, the meaning of the change would probably be clarified. Instances can be found to prove almost anything.

Tenant farmers are affected more than owner-operators, but the latter by no means escape. The recent invalidation of the moratorium on mortgage foreclosures is having its effect. Then, too, farmers retire and sell their land, and the farmers die and the children sell the land.

Insurance companies and banks do play an important role in the trend. In 1935 ten percent of the total farm land of Iowa was corporate owned, and 1,538 farms were cultivated under "managers." But the chief part institutions have filled has been in selling their land to individual farmers who are increasing their holdings rather than in engaging in multiple-farm operation themselves. However, some insurance companies have bent their efforts specially to favor reclamation by former owners or purchase by tenants.

In Two Directions

A change with such complex causes must have equally complex results. Is it "good" or is it "bad"? Is it toward an agriculture based on a more stable family-sized farm or is it toward a different kind of farming community?

Apparently the movement is dual. In some instances it is toward a healthier farm community in terms of the past--the owner-operator farming with little or no hired help but with all members of the family pitching in, the individual farm and the community based on farming as a way of life as well as a business. But in other instances the change seems clearly to be toward something different. AND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THESE TWO TENDENCIES IS LARGELY ONE OF DEGREE.

1. Better Land, Fewer People? Let's examine the first effect. Many crop and grazing farms in Iowa are too small to support a family upon an above-subsistence level in competition with modern commercial farming. The operator may be owner or tenant, but in his fight for a living he turns soil miner, exploiting its wealth, making it vulnerable to erosion.

A nearby farmer with a capital surplus does not have a farm large enough to give him the best return on his investment in his machinery. So he absorbs the poorer farm, reconstructing the exhausted acres through crop rotation and rest, and increases his own income without equally increasing his overhead. In these cases, multiple farm operation is undoubtedly better for the soil.

But what about the people: Is it better to have a large number of farm families barely above subsistence levels or a smaller number operating larger units and earning incomes in excess of their minimum requirement? Better, certainly for those who survive, but is it better for those that lose their farms? THEY MUST BE TAKEN CARE OF--IS IT BETTER TO TAKE CARE OF THEM IN THE COUNTRY OR IN THE CITIES AND TOWNS?

2. Or Farmer into Laborer? These problems will press us more fiercely if multiple farm operation radically changes our Iowa economy in a direction in which the other phase of the trend seems headed. Larger farms mean fewer farms; fewer farmers and more mechanization mean fewer farmers and their families. And this means keener competition among tenants for farms, with greater insecurity for those who get farms and many who do not get farms.

It means a larger transient population, moving from county to county, state to state, with hurt to themselves and damage to institutions like the school. It means, probably, a larger agricultural proletariat class, many of whose members have only seasonal work, and many who supplement their earnings in mines or in town and city industries.

It means swollen millions out of work and on relief; higher taxes; lower purchasing power...the melancholy chain of causation could be continued.

Sharper Division

All in all, our Iowa agriculture may be on the road toward a sharp division into three kinds of farming: large, highly industrialized, commercialized and mechanized crop farms; specialized farms, such as for dairy and hog operations, which are largely independent of the size of the farm and have been profitable in spite of ruinous grain prices; and subsistence farms, growing as much as possible for home consumption.

A few of the implications are suggested: an emotional and political alignment of the farm-operator with the industrialist of the city and of the farm laborer with the urban laborer; a decreasing birth-rate among the farm population, which is the principal source of repopulation of our cities today; a lower standard of education and culture for those who migrate to other parts of the nation."

The story, in brief, could be the sacrifice of agriculture as a way of life for the many upon the altar of agriculture as a way of making a living for the few.

The trend hasn't gone far in this direction yet. And there are forces working against it. Tenants compete for farms. Attention is being focussed upon their problem and they are being encouraged and helped to secure better tenure or to purchase their farms by FSA and others.

The great mass of Iowa farmers strongly oppose the change toward fewer and larger farms. Greater value has recently been put upon the non-material elements in rural life. There is a law of "diminishing returns" in operating large farms in Iowa, as elsewhere--the bigger the farm the higher the profit in good times under good management, but the bigger the loss in poor times or under inefficient management.

But economic factors are working toward larger and fewer units. One-half of the equity in the land each generation is inherited by sons and daughters living in cities. Many farms in Iowa are too small or too inexpertly run for either their own good or the good of the owner or the farmer.

This problem, like all problems of its kind, will not be solved by blind passionate opposition. Its solution demands that we answer in our own mind the question, "What kind of an agriculture do we want?" and that we direct our policy according to the answer. We must find out more exactly what is taking place and what it means. And we must place the proper importance upon good management and scientific farming as a key to a sound agriculture.

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